

Decision Memo

for

Valles Caldera National Preserve

2003 Interim Hiking Programs

Valles Caldera National Preserve
Sandoval County, New Mexico
June 2003

PROPOSED ACTION:

It is my decision to open the Valles Caldera National Preserve for an interim hiking program. This program includes self-guided and guided day hikes on designated trails. The designated trails will consist primarily of existing roads or trails. Hikes may require a reservation, permit and payment of an entrance fee.

Location of Proposed Action:

For the interim program, a limited number of trails will be marked and open using existing roadbeds or trails. A description of open trails will be available on the web site via the reservation system listed under "recreation." A map of open hikes is available at the Valles Caldera Trust offices. In addition, a map of open hiking trails is being creating using a Global Positioning Satellite system and a layer will be developed to show open hiking trails as the trails are designated.

These hikes will be accessible from State Highway 4 or the interior of the Preserve. Staging will occur at the Highway 4 pull-outs or at a designated parking area near the main corrals in the Valle Grande. A shuttle system will be provided for transporting visitors to interior trails in order to control vehicular traffic in and through sensitive areas on the Preserve.

Environmental Protection:

The following measures will be utilized to protect the environment and assure that any potential impacts are minimized:

1. A review of each trail by an archeologist for compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act will be conducted.
2. Monitoring of trails, including a survey of trail condition prior to use by the public and follow-up survey and data collection will be conducted on an annual basis. Trails found to be suffering from overuse will be removed from use or remediated.

PURPOSE AND NEED:

At this time, members of the public are not permitted to hike on the Preserve. This program is needed to:

- Address the demand from the public to allow access to the Preserve before the final framework document of the Trust's comprehensive management framework is completed.
- Allow the public to experience the exceptional scenery, wildlife and other assets of the Preserve.
- Provide education and interpretation to the public on the unique cultural, historical and geological values of the Preserve and also to share the mission of the Valles Caldera Trust.
- Allow the public to provide feedback to the staff on what they see as the future of the Valles Caldera Trust and give suggestions for program improvements.
- Provide for a variety of lengths, experiences, and challenge levels so that all ages can enjoy a quality hiking experience on the Preserve.

REASONS FOR THE DECISION:

It is a desire of the Valles Caldera Trust to provide opportunities for the public to experience the Preserve. Hiking is one of several activities to be offered on an interim basis that are designed to provide a range of satisfactory experiences for visitors. Self-guided activities have been identified as a high priority for the public through various avenues of public feedback. It is the intent of the Trust to create an interim hiking program to satisfy the public's desire to hike the Preserve while developing a more comprehensive and long-term recreational plan.

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION:

An environmental analysis was conducted for this proposed action. As a result of that analysis, the Executive Director has determined that the proposal is in a category of actions that are excluded from preparation of an environmental document. The category of exclusion is established by the Trust's draft NEPA procedures as published in the *Federal Register* (Vol. 68, No. 28, p. 6987). The proposal involves seasonal backcountry recreational activities described under Section 101.6(l) of the draft procedures.

FINDINGS OF NO EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES:

An Interdisciplinary Team was formed from specialists working for the Valles Caldera Trust. That team consisted of an archaeologist, a recreational specialist and an ecologist. These specialists did not identify any significant issues during project development, and all concerns were addressed by inclusion as part of the standard management requirements.

It was also determined through the environmental analysis that there were no extraordinary circumstances or conditions, as listed in the Federal Register (Vol. 57, Num. 182, pg 43208, section 30.3 (2)) related to this proposal that might cause the action to have significant effects. Specifically, this determination is based upon the absence, among others, of adverse effects on the following:

1. *Steep slopes or highly erosive soils.*

This project does not have steep slopes nor is it on highly erosive soils. The slopes are very flat (< 5% gradient) and the soils are stable and covered by considerable organic material.

2. *Threatened or endangered species or their critical habitat.*

There are no threatened, endangered, or proposed plant or animal species identified in the project area. The project area has not been identified as critical habitat for threatened and endangered species.

3. *Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds.*

The hiking trails will not disturb flood plains or wetlands. This area is not within a municipal watershed.

4. *Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas.*

This project is not within a wilderness area or National Recreation Area.

5. *Inventoried roadless areas.*

This project is not within an inventoried roadless area.

6. *Research Natural Areas.*

This project is not within a Research Natural Area.

7. *Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.*

A heritage resource survey was completed in May of 2002 and May and June of 2003 on the initial five trails. The survey identified heritage resource issues on two of the proposed trails. One trail will not be opened until a more complete survey and mitigation measures are taken. In the other instance, a mitigation measure has been employed to prevent public access to the potential site.

On June 5, 2003, the Preserve Manager consulted with representatives of the Pueblo of Jemez, who did not express any significant cultural or traditional concerns regarding the proposed hiking program. Other neighboring Pueblos were consulted in 2002 regarding the initial hiking trails with no significant cultural or traditional concerns identified. Additional consultations with neighboring Pueblos to identify any concerns with other proposed trails will occur prior to additional trails being opened under this program.

No other cultural resource issues have been identified in the project area, and a memo on the archeologist's findings is available in the project file.

SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT:

The proposed action was discussed in public Board of Trustee meetings on January 30, 2003, April 8, 2003 and May 23, 2003. At that time, the public provided comment to the board about hiking and other recreational activities. The Trust will continue to review public input about the hiking program as feedback from visitors and other members of the public is gathered. As a part of our adaptive management practices, this interim hiking program is designed to serve as an important first step in creating recreational programs for the general public, and as such, it will be adjusted in response to public input and the monitored impacts on the resources.

Project development included discussions between resource specialists working for the Valles Caldera Trust. This Interdisciplinary Team visited, mapped and photographed the project area and resource issues were discussed and recommendations proposed, which have been included in the project design.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS:

All management practices and activities of the proposed action are consistent with the management direction as identified by the Council on Environmental Quality and in accordance with the Code of Federal Regulations (7CFR1b.2). This project is also consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Endangered Species Act (1973), the Federal Clean Water Act (1972), and the Clean Air Act (1977).

IMPLEMENTATION DATE:

June 7, 2003.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITY:

This project is not subject to appeal pursuant to Public Law 106-248, Section 108(f)(6).

CONTACT PERSON:

For more information, contact: Gary Ziehe, Executive Director
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SIGNATURE AND DATE:

Approved by: ___/s/_____
GARY ZIEHE
Executive Director, Responsible Official

_____6-6-03_____
Date